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Review of “New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge”

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Book Review

New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge, ed. Susana Nuccetelli. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2003. 317 pages. ISBN: 0262140837

This is a collection of fourteen previously unpublished papers on the fit between semantic externalism and claims about self-knowledge. Philosophers of mind as well as epistemologists, especially those interested in the transmission of warrant, will find this collection worthwhile. Exactly how worthwhile depends on what aspects of the topic one is interested in. To help potential readers make their own determination, I will discuss the first five papers in some detail then I will briefly catalogue the remaining papers. This is appropriate since the first five papers are all nicely focused on a single issue, while the other nine papers address an assortment of issues.

The papers with the common focus –papers by Martin Davies, Crispin Wright, Brian McLaughlin, Michael McKinsey, and Jessica Brown – take up an issue stemming from McKinsey’s seminal 1991 *Analysis* paper, “Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access.” There, McKinsey offered a reductio against the conjunction of two claims.

- (1) I can know *a priori* the content of what I am thinking.
- (2) Externalism about thought contents is, as a matter of logical necessity, true.

(1) has it that without investigating the external world by the usual empirical means, I can know, for example, that I am thinking that water is wet. A straightforward implication of (2) to many self-ascriptions of propositional attitudes is that one or other contingent fact holds. Precisely what kind of contingent fact depends on two things: what kind of constituent concept we are focusing on and the particular externalist doctrine. On a Putnam-style externalism, thoughts that involve the natural kind concept of water supervene (in part) on one’s physical environment. As a consequence, having a thought wherein one deploys the concept of water requires that water exists. On a Burge-style externalism, thoughts that involve concepts like the concept of arthritis supervene (in part) on one’s social environment. As a consequence having a thought wherein one deploys the concept of arthritis requires that other language users exist, that they interact with some particular physical phenomenon, and that there are established patterns of deference in one’s linguistic community. But all of these facts – that water exists, that other language users exist, that they interact with some particular physical phenomenon, and that there are certain patterns of deference – are contingent facts and surely only knowable *a posteriori*. But consider: if one knows *a priori* that one is thinking that p, one knows *a priori* that therein one has deployed some concept c, and one knows that it is logically necessary that if one is deploying c then some contingent environmental fact holds, then it

seems that, by deducing, one can know the target contingent fact *a priori*. This gets us the third claim:

(3) I can know *a priori* contingent facts about my environment.

But is it at all plausible that we can deduce contingent facts about our environment from what we are thinking plus the result of some Putnam-style or Burge-style thought experiment? Is it at all plausible that we can know contingent facts about our environment in an entirely non-empirical way?

Responses come in four kinds. Each can be characterized by what it rejects. The first rejects (1), the claim that we can know *a priori* what we are thinking (McKinsey opts for this response). The second rejects (2), the claim that externalism is true as a matter of logical necessity, perhaps because externalism is false, or perhaps because it is only true in some weaker way. These are incompatibilist responses, since they agree that the argument constitutes a genuine *reductio* and that it therefore shows that we cannot subscribe to both (1) and (2). The third response rejects the alleged entailment. By resisting the entailment, we can retain the first two claims and avoid the absurd claim – this is the major compatibilist response. The fourth response rejects the claim that we cannot have *a priori* knowledge of the entailed contingent empirical facts. On this view, the first two claims are embraced (hence, this is a form of compatibilism), the entailment is embraced, and energy is devoted to removing the ‘absurd’ tag from (3).

The first five papers discuss a specific compatibilist option, one that focuses on so-called transmission failures. Compatibilists of this stripe point out that there are cases where knowing the premises of a sound argument do not put one in a position to come to know for the first time – that is, to learn – the conclusion. In an earlier paper, Wright offered this example:

- (A) Jones has just written an ‘x’ on that piece of paper.
- (B) Jones has just voted.
- (C) An election is taking place.

Here, (A) can only serve as evidence for (B) if it is antecedently reasonable to accept (C). Therefore, one cannot come to know (C) from knowing (B) on the basis of (A). Cases like this suggest a compatibilist response to McKinsey’s argument: one’s *a priori* knowledge that one is thinking that water is wet and one’s *a priori* knowledge of externalism do not put one in a position to come to know contingent facts about one’s environment. Instead, one only has the knowledge at (1) and the knowledge of (2) if it is *antecedently* reasonable for one to accept the contingent empirical claim at (3). Hence, (1) and (2) are true, but together they do not make a route that allows one to acquire the knowledge at (3). In the parlance of the literature, the warrant at (1) and (2) does not *transmit* to the belief at (3).

Martin Davies defends this response, seeking to identify the relevant patterns of transmission failure in a way that is both immune to counterexample and non-ad hoc. However, Davies’s preferred pattern is convincingly counterexampled in the papers by Crispin Wright and Brian McLaughlin. After having a go of his own at identifying the pattern of transmission failure instanced in (1)-(3), Wright concedes to McKinsey the point that in the end transmission failure is a red herring. As McKinsey argues in his paper, his original argument goes through as long as a weaker principle, the

closure principle, is true. Where transmission says that the knowledge at (1) and (2) puts one in a position to come to have, perhaps for the very first time, the knowledge at (3), closure makes no claim about the order of knowing. Instead, closure just says that if one has the knowledge captured at (1), and (2) is true, then one has the knowledge captured at (3). Wright agrees with closure. So in an attempt to take the sting out of McKinsey's reductio, he introduces a distinction between two kinds of warrant. The knowledge at (1) is achieved by introspection and the knowledge of (2) is achieved by working through a thought experiment. In Wright's words, such achievements provide 'earned warrants'. By closure, it follows that one's belief at (3) is warranted. However, one's warrant at (3) is not earned (Wright says it could only be earned empirically) – rather, it is an 'entitlement'. In effect, warrant as a generic property is closed, but earned warrant is not. Inspired by Wittgenstein's idea of a hinge proposition, Wright claims that one's entitlement at (3) is a genuine warrant because of the "operational necessity" of proceeding on the assumption that one's concepts are in sufficiently good standing that one is not subject to illusions of content, something that one would be subject to were there no water in one's environment (page 68). As Wright himself admits, much needs to be done to develop the idea of an entitlement. But Wright leaves it at a suggestion. This is a bit disappointing: in the end, it seems that all Wright has done is introduce two labels ('earned warrant' and 'entitlement') and highlight a feature (perhaps a relevant one; perhaps not) of the items that he wants to label 'entitlements'.

In addition to giving counterexamples to Davies's and Wright's attempts to identify the pattern of transmission failure instanced at (1)-(3), Brian McLaughlin brings to bear a useful distinction between strong and weak *a priori* knowledge. Roughly, strong *a priori* knowledge is not empirically defeasible, while weak *a priori* knowledge is. He then contends that as long as either the knowledge at (1) or the knowledge of (2) is only weakly *a priori*, there will be transmission failure. So for McLaughlin, the real value of McKinsey's argument is that it draws our attention to the possibility of empirical defeaters for findings of introspection – for example, the defeat that would come with empirical evidence that one is on Dry Earth. McLaughlin then goes on to note that for many mental states, it is either strongly *a priori* knowable that one is in such a state or it is strongly *a priori* knowable that such a state is external. However, he asserts (without argument) that for no mental state are both of these things true.

In a characteristically strong paper, McKinsey contends that Wright's discussion allows us to see that both strong and weak apriority are closed. McKinsey resists Wright's claim that one could be warranted, even in an unearned entitled way, in believing that there is water in one's environment in the absence of any empirical evidence for this. McKinsey goes on to argue that one would have to have some warrant for this environmental claim if one is going to be warranted in believing that one is having a water thought – thus arguing, in effect, that weak apriority is closed. According to McKinsey, this is so because the falsity of the environmental claim would empirically defeat the *a priori* warrant for the claim about what one is thinking (page 111). This crucial claim is far from clear, though. If *q* would defeat the warrant I have for believing *p*, it is far from obvious that this implies that I can only be warranted in believing *p* if I am also warranted in believing *q*.

Jessica Brown rounds out the discussion of the transmission strategy with two criticisms of Wright's paper. One is McKinsey's charge that Wright's move to entitlement does not remove the absurdity of (3). The other is that the pattern of transmission failure identified by Wright presupposes epistemological internalism, a doctrine that many semantic externalists reject.

As I said, the remaining papers do not share much common focus. However, there is a virtue in this: the papers give one a good sense of just how much there is to think about at the intersection of externalism and self-knowledge – much more, I suspect, than many of us would have thought even a decade ago. Here are quick summaries of the remaining papers, written by Fred Dretske, Gary Ebbs, Susana Nuccetelli, Anthony Brueckner, Joseph Owens, Kevin Falvey, Sanford Goldberg, Richard Fumerton, and Matthias Steup. With his usual emphasis on comparing the representational nature of the mind with that of gadgets, Dretske defends the surprising claim that we have privileged introspective access to *what we think*, but not to the fact *that we think*. In a pro-compatibilist paper that is tough going at times, Ebbs argues that thinking externally-determined thoughts excludes doubting the entailed environmental claims; he then construes cases in which we can't make sense of doubting a claim as limiting cases of knowledge, indeed of *a priori* knowledge. Nuccetelli clearly outlines a case for thinking that, contra McKinsey, it is only a posteriori knowable that externalism is true of a given concept. Brueckner criticizes Akeel Bilgrami's and Richard Moran's recent arguments that self-knowledge is a necessary condition for responsible agency (Bilgrami) and rationally forming action-guiding beliefs (Moran). Owens uses Davidson as a foil to argue that incompatibilism rests on the mistaken view that if I am to know that I am thinking that *p*, I must have comparative knowledge of content – that is, knowledge that I am not thinking propositions incompatible with *p*. Falvey argues against Paul Boghossian's so-called switching argument for incompatibilism on the grounds that there are independent reasons to think that, without any failure in memory, one can go from knowing what one is presently thinking to later not knowing what one thought. Goldberg proposes that there are two importantly different senses of knowing one's own thoughts, and that semantic externalism implies that one of these is compatible with self-knowledge, while the other is not – an implication that, Goldberg maintains, does not count against externalism. Fumerton gives reasons to think that epistemological externalists are well positioned to embrace compatibilism, while epistemological internalists are not; to epistemological internalists, Fumerton recommends rejecting semantic externalism. And, finally, Steup argues against the fourth response, the one that embraces *a priori* knowledge of environmental facts.

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